

COMMUNICATIONS

CONVERSIONS

TO THE EDITOR:

The position on conversion by Rabbi Immanuel Jacobovits (*Tradition* 24:2, Winter, 1989) is both stringent and distressing. Does not the Chief Rabbi know that the vast majority, possibly 75% of Jews in Great Britain and the United States are neither Orthodox nor observant? Not only do they not follow the Shulhan Arukh, I question if they know what it is. Only a very small minority of our people are genuinely Orthodox and observe Shabbat, Kashrut, etc. This fact makes his approach to the highly delicate and controversial issue of conversion not only pure obstinancy in the face of grim reality, but quite disastrous for our people, especially in view of the nearly total annihilation of European Jewry.

In sharp contrast with this position is that of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. His indeed is in the spirit of Hillel, and one which the revered sage would surely approve and recommend. The Rav expressed his thoughts on conversion and converts in an interview with Pinchas Hacohen Peli in *Hadoar* (September 5, 1986). The Rav faced this grave problem with boldness and courage. It is nothing less that startling to read that he believed that in this matter the "Reformers" have the correct way. He hastens to add that his Orthodox brethren will "stone" him for this heretical opinion. The Rav holds that since 70% of the Gentile women who marry Jews are ready to accept Judaism, they should be welcomed. He argues that a fresh approach within the Orthodox community is imperative, as are fresh programs and methods to make these converts faithful Jews. Admitting that it is difficult to come to terms with this idea, the Rav insisted that it is reality. He repeated a forgotten truth that converted wives only too often lead their indifferent

Jewish husbands to greater loyalty to Judaism, inducing or persuading them to become "better" Jews. He expressed regret that Orthodoxy does not yet realize that the problem affects its ranks as it does the non-Orthodox.

In these trying times, when many of our young people contract marriages with non-Jews, the majority of whom are ready and often eager to accept Judaism, the position of the Rav is not only realistic but one which is imperative for the preservation of our people and faith. It is the approach of Hillel, one with a venerable tradition behind it. That of the Chief Rabbi, on the other hand, is that of Shammai: rigid, uncompromising and self-defeating. We dare not forget the illustrious converts we have had, and that even King David is a descendant of a convert. Who can predict how many distinguished Jews may yet come in the decades ahead from those who have joined our ranks and entered "under the wings of the *Shekhina*" through marriage?

The Talmud (Shabbat 31a) confirms the wisdom and practicality of the Rav. Three Gentiles came to Shammai with rather unusual stipulations for conversion. All three were rejected instantly. Hillel, ignoring their conditions, accepted and welcomed them without hesitation, despite the fact that one conditioned his acceptance of Judaism on his becoming a *Kohen Gadol*. The Gemara related that the three converts faulted Shammai on the ground that his impatience would have excluded them from the "world" of the Jewish faith. But they have naught but praise for Hillel, as he brought them "under the wings of the *Shekhina*."

As for the halakhic questions involved in the procedure of conversion, surely the Rav is as much an authority in this field as is the Chief Rabbi.

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THE CONSULTING EDITOR COMMENTS:

Rabbi Lewis has made an enormous mountain out of a conversation written up by Prof. Peli, may he rest in peace, over twenty years after it occurred. The content is indeed startling in view of the fact that the Rav, as far as I can discover, neither commended to the RCA the liberalized standards supported by Lewis, nor did he tolerate a liberal policy on conversions at the Maimonides School in Boston.

Given that the remarks reported by Peli go against the Rav's public record, given Peli's ties to the Conservative movement, and given that Peli wrote them only after the Rav's health had forced him to withdraw from public activity, one might conclude that his record of the conversation is not totally reliable. In fact, many readers of the interview have so concluded.

Prof. Peli, whom I recall fondly and whose company the Rav and many other intelligent people enjoyed, can no longer defend his reputation. Yet it is not difficult to think of a much more plausible explanation that does not impugn his veracity. That is, I presume the conversation more or less took place. The Rav, casting about for some ray of hope, raised the possibility of a radical halakhic solution. He did not find any avenue worthy of serious pursuit. Therefore he did not pursue it, and continued to conduct the affairs for which he was responsible in a contrary manner.

The difference between routine commiseration and passionate concern is the anxiety to leave no stone unturned in seeking a resolution. The difference between clever manipulation of Halakha and authentic greatness is the readiness to abandon, however reluctantly, an approach that has been weighed and found wanting. Lord Jacobovits requires no defense. Neither does the Rav, may God grant him life and health. It is because he has displayed sensitivity to human anguish, a precise ear for the nuances of the religious spirit as well as a paramount commitment to Halakha as the law of our lives, that we, his *talmidim*, are so pained by his absence from our public world.

SHALOM CARMY

RABBI OVADIA YOSEF

TO THE EDITOR:

The review of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's reconstructed siddur (*Tradition* 25:2) notes the unique position Hakham Ovadia holds as a halakhic and political leader. I think it of interest to note Rabbi Ovadia's own ambivalence regarding his many roles.

Volume two of *Taharat haBayit*, his major halakhic work on Hilkhot Niddah, was recently published. In his introduction, Rabbi Yosef explains that publication of the second volume was delayed, in part, by his activities on behalf of the Shas political party. He then relates the following recollection:

That night I dreamt that I was visited by the late Gaon Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (author of *Responsa Rav Paalim* and *Ben Ish Hai*). His face shown brightly as the sun. He entered my library, sat at the table and before him was one of my works—I believe it was my *Responsa Yabia Omer*. He leafed through it and then said, "Very good." He asked me if I continue to give public discourses in Torah and Mussar and I answered that I continue to do so. . . . I complained that I am hampered in preparing my writings for publication [by these public commitments]. My friend graciously responded that I should hold onto one and not let go of the other because God takes great pleasure in benefiting the masses with public discourses and bringing them to repentance. . . . I awoke and it was a dream! And indeed it was all true, just as the angel the Maggid said to Maran [R. Yosef Karo, author of] the *Bet Yosef*: Do not be troubled by your being involved in public matters and as a result you must defer dealing with Torah . . . for both are good.

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ANTHROPOLOGY, EVOLUTION,
AND JUDAISM

TO THE EDITOR:

In his thoughtful review, "Anthropology, Evolution and Judaism: Rethinking *The Wings of the Dove*" (*Tradition* 25:1,

Fall 1989), Professor Gerald F. Murray refers to “several visible cracks” in my arguments. I write herewith to respond briefly to his specific comments.

1. Murray criticizes my use of the term “compelled” when I wrote that “(the scientist) is compelled to the supposition of a creative intelligence by the same dictates of scientific logic that pertain to the formulation of all theories of physical processes whose features or etiology are not fully given to cognitive analysis.” In my book, I wrote that the scientist can restrict his inquiries to what the tools of natural science enable, and leave untouched the questions of origins and harmony. If he chooses, however, to entertain these questions, he is brought to the supposition of a creative intelligence. Of course, scientific ability is not contingent on either posing these questions or accepting propositions that in themselves are not subject to scientific consideration. I certainly do not intend to make the adoption of such assumptions normative for the scientific community. There *is*, as Murray puts it, some of the metaphoric in my formulation; but then it is metaphoric in a sense broader than personal invention: The supposition of a Creator has been posited by a large number of leading scientists, as a postulate persuasively deriving *from* scientific knowledge and insight.

2. Murray questions the scientific correctness of the term “unfolding” as I apply it to biological evolution. My resort to the term in the context of these essays is by intent metaphoric. Language is meant to convey ideas in given contexts. The aim of my pages on evolution was to propose that the Creator’s will and involvement with His creation are discernible, become manifest, *unfold* before human perception in the *unfolding* of the biological world over vast evolutionary epochs. I also drew an analogy to the *unfolding* of *halakha*, the process by which the divine will for human society comes to multifaceted expression as man and the divine interact over sociological and circumstantial epochs. Metaphors can serve the purpose of bringing into focus analogous patterns in different motifs. I attempted to use them to this end, in the

hope they would not be read literally, out of phase.

3. Murray writes that the “sophisticated neocortical functioning that constitutes the organic base of the human mind” originates by the same evolutionary processes that give rise to all biological structures and function; there is neither a scientific nor a theological need, accordingly, for postulating an extraordinary divine intervention in the generation of human consciousness/mind/spirit. But the endowment of man with mind and spirit *is* extraordinary. The forming of Adam’s body from clay can permissibly be read as allegory by a believing Jew. The coming into being of the human soul is not an allegory. It separates man in worth, dignity, and responsibility—before the Creator and before other human beings—from all other creatures. Sophisticated neocortical function may constitute the organic base of the human mind, but it is not the human mind. Mind and spirit are in constant interaction with the soma, but they cannot be understood in somatic terms only.

I am constrained to submit that an encompassing conception of the source and nature of the unique mind of man must uniquely include a parameter of the metaphysical, a quality no more subject to scientific inquiry than is the question, What existed before the Primal Bang?

4. Murray considers unscholarly and unbalanced my comparison of Jewish and Christian views of nature and science. He argues that I sympathetically attribute the rejection of evolutionary theories, and of scientific inquiry in general, that has come to the fore in Orthodox Jewish quarters to a misinterpretation of normative Judaic attitudes that derives from transient historical determinants, including a co-option of Christian positions; and that I unfairly ascribe Christian antagonism to science to Christianity’s basic world view.

Murray must know that there is a vast difference between attitudes transiently encroaching on an ideology in response to circumstance, and attitudes that lie at the core. Christianity has repeatedly fought specific scientific observations and understandings as mortal heresies. In contrast,

such negativity to the study of nature has not had an anchor in classical Judaism, and I doubt that a scholarly analysis would blur the definitive distinction. It is derivative in part of the very different manner in which Christianity and Judaism relate to canonical texts. Normative Christianity is strongly held to a literal reading, with only limited interpretative leeway; scientific findings conflict with scriptural passages. The dissonance is reinforced by Christianity's emphasis on the other-worldly, its tendency to equate spirituality with a deprecation of the sensibilities and passions of body and intellect. These basic postures ramify and metamorphose to make for broad attitudinal constellations that lie uneasily with a rationalist-scientific approach to reality. Judaism, in contrast, is invested with a powerful resilience by its Oral Law in dealing with growing knowledge of the physical universe, with change and circumstance. And Judaism does not demand—indeed discourages—a denial of self and intellect in the paths of religious fulfillment.

I do not dismiss the possible contribution to the animosity against science by some Jews of a process of convergent ideological evolution. Traditionalist groups isolated in secular society may well take defensive recourse to obscurantist elements in their own, diverse traditions. There are such elements in Judaism. My case is that these have not been in the mainstream of Judaic belief and attitudes. And I make the plea, indeed, that Jews not enlist today in alien crusades against the religious legitimacy of scientific pursuit. I am the more prompted to do so by the repeated, public joining of Orthodox Jewish groups with conservative Christian ones in political actions aimed at restricting and directing the teaching of science in the American school system.

5. Murray sees me as advocating a bare-bone *minimalism* of belief. Not at all. I propose that the only doctrinal belief mandatory for the Jew is that of a Creator concerned with the universe—the only belief *with regard to creation and nature*. But Judaism obviously is concerned not only with these dimensions, and there

clearly are *ikkare emuna* pertaining to others that, together with the Law, make up its fabric. Murray himself says that my entire discussion assumes an acceptance of *Torah miSinai*. This acceptance, too, is an affirmation of belief, not merely a mechanical submission to ethnic custom.

I reject the position attributed to me by Murray that an allegorical understanding of the origin and content of the sacred text itself is no less valid than acceptance of the hypothesis of biological evolution. That would be incompatible with the normative/mainstream/Orthodox Judaism with which I identify.

There is discussion and disagreement in the sources as to the legitimate limits of naturalistic and allegorical approaches to the non-legal portions of Scripture. That there are limits is beyond question. The inclusively allegorical outlook on the content of Scripture and its origin (!) inferred to me by Murray is beyond any boundary; even further, the idea he would have me imply that an Orthodox Jew could legitimately regard the Sinai events as non-binding on faith as long as he observes *halakha*. What I attempted in these pages is well in the mainstream of Judaic thought, to distinguish between the meaning and message of canonical events of Judaism and the modalities of their occurrence.

I contend that the dimensions of belief and observance are complementary. Both lie as the heart of the Judaic ethos, and they find different forms of articulation. There is a prevalent hesitancy in Judaism at dogmatization, but that does not negate the cardinal importance of its principles of faith. In the words of Rabbi J. H. Hertz,

Judaism is a system of spiritual truths, moral laws, and religious practices. The moral laws and religious practices have been duly classified, codified, and clothed with binding authority. Not so the spiritual doctrines. No formulation of these exists which enjoys universal recognition by the House of Israel. There are various reasons for this. One of them is the fact that Judaism never made salvation dependent upon doctrine *in itself* apart from its influence on conduct.

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GERALD F. MURRAY REPLIES:

David Weiss has justly summarized, but not fully alleviated, my concerns with parts of his fine book. I congratulate him on the evolution (or unfolding) of his stance on “freedom of belief.” In his book he insisted repeatedly that *no* belief is obligatory to a Jew beyond that of a concerned Creator of the Universe, and he emphatically did *not* restrict this freedom to matters of “creation and nature,” as he now claims. He explicitly labeled the Exodus events as a story not binding on faith, allegorizing not only creation and nature, but dealings between God and the *am* as well.

I read him carefully and pushed his argument to its logical Sinai conclusion. In Orthodox Judaism “. . . no conception is forbidden that does not deny the essential belief in a Creator heedful of His works,” writes Weiss (p. 85). But what then about the conception of Reform Jews who recognize the heedful Creator but teach that the scriptures are products of human culture and the Sinai events consequently allegorical? The freedom of thought that Weiss eloquently encourages in his book, he now condemns with equal eloquence in his response, shocked (!) that a reviewer could have inferred such notions. He now states what I explicitly pointed out in my review: that Orthodox Judaism mandates not only *halakha*, but a corpus of beliefs as well. Though hinting at reviewer misinterpretation, he has drastically toned down the unqualified freedom-of-belief generalizations found in his book.

He continues to propose, as an Orthodox Jewish alternative, a model of human origins that would have the body evolve by natural processes restricting God’s direct intervention to the creation of the human mind. And though he now admits that some Jews can become anti-scientific on their own (“convergent ideological evolution”), he persists in the insinuation that Torah scholars opposed to evolution are entertaining Christian-like thoughts.

There is a paradoxical linkage between these two notions. Though he ignored my question as to why Conservative and Reform Jews accept evolution if exposure

to Christianity explains Jewish anti-scientism, let me now ask if he will accept Pius XII and his Vatican curia as representatives of the “normative Christianity” to which he here alludes. In 1950, Pius XII wrote the encyclical *Humani Generis* to discuss evolution. In paragraph 36 he officially encourages “research and discussions . . . [to] take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it enquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter.” However, he immediately restricts this to the evolution of the body, stating that “. . . the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God.” Lo and behold: the mixed evolutionary/creationist model proffered by Weiss to the Jewish community is *indistinguishable from the one officially promulgated by the Vatican nearly half a century ago*.

If therefore a crypto-Christian complaint is to be penned, it should perhaps be posted, not on the door of the yeshiva community and its leaders, but on the door of the scholar urging us to accept (unknownst to himself, I assume) a Vatican-approved variant of evolutionary theory. But let me probe further. Weiss has made openness to evolution the touchstone of the rationality of a religious system. Very well. To which faith system then should he, with intellectual honesty, award the prize of scientific openness *by his own evolutionary criteria*? To the system whose teachers generally steer their students away from evolution? Or to the system which anticipated and officially promulgated Weiss’ model of evolution before Weiss had even discovered it?

To reiterate recommendations made in the review: (1) no purpose is served by diluting our discussion of Judaism with cartoon-like caricatures of other faith systems, particularly if our scholarly bibliography stops with Galileo; and (2) there is no call for even the remotest hint that Torah scholars who disagree with us on evolution are “thinking like Christians.” In the Jewish community few insults are as offensive as the *goyische kop* charge “You think

like a Christian.” This form of argumentation should be excised from a scholarly work.

I propose to Weiss that there are sound *internal* reasons for the Torah community keeping evolution at arm’s length. In his book, he creatively documented that Jewish tradition *permits* allegorical treatments of Scripture through internal exegetical processes. Evolutionary theory, however, even more so than other branches of natural science, goes further. It would *force* the Torah community into allegorical reinterpretations of Scripture for reasons extrinsic to Torah itself. The *gedolim* predictably and reasonably resist such exogenous pressures on their interpretation of Torah.

Furthermore, the imposition of allegorical analysis can have two destabilizing impacts on the individual *ma’amin*: (a) it is expansive; (b) it may be irreversible. Expansive: once it is hypothesized that the Adam’s rib and Noah’s ark accounts are allegories rather than factual history, an inquisitive and ruthlessly consistent mind not yet steeped in Torah will ask why the same hypothesis should not be applied to parts of the Sinai account itself. Irreversible: though it is easy to accept as allegorical a text that one used to think was historical, the reverse—to command a secular mind to accept as history a miracle-rich text that it has learned to read as allegory—borders on the impossible. Thus rabbinic suspicion of evolution may function positively to shield beginners from prematurely allegorizing their way out of Torah belief, until such time as their growth in Torah learning enables them to handle the initially destabilizing insight that not all happened exactly as written. Though I share Weiss’ attachment to scientific paradigms, the role of our Rabbis is to engender and protect

love of Torah, not of anthropology or of biology.

To conclude, David Weiss’ program has five core points which few members of the *kahal* may accept in their entirety: (a) naturalistic understandings of physical processes and bodily evolution; (b) allegorization of texts whose *peshat* is inconsistent with science; (c) divine intervention to explain the human mind; (d) a prohibition against application of any allegorical analysis to the Sinai account; and (e) faithful practice of *halakha*. I suspect that *bene Torah* will continue to reject (a) and (b) and that many educated secular *baale teshuva* will have problems with (c) and (d). But if we follow Weiss’ exhortations with regard to point (e)—if we *naaseh venishma* in that order—then intellectual scientific dilemmas impeding pursuit of holiness in Torah will dwindle in importance, as powerful truth and wisdom of another order begin making themselves felt in our lives. In its uncompromising advocacy of fidelity to this law of the Rabbis, therefore, the value of David Weiss’ book to the Jewish community far outweighs any of its shortcomings.

CORRECTION

An error crept into my article “The Second Pesah: Mitzvah as Paradigm” (*Tradition* 24:2, Winter, 1989). I stated (p. 42) that the privilege of bringing the Pesah Sheni offering includes “not only those who were, at the first Pesah, involved in a mitzvah, but anyone who did not deliberately absent himself.” This is inaccurate. The halakhah is that anyone who did not bring the first Passover offering—deliberately or not—may bring Pesah Sheni, as noted in Mishneh Torah, *Korban Pesah*, Chap. 5 ff.

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